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ABSTRACT

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TE KURA AKORANGA O TAMAKI MAKAURAU

The Future of the Past: Oral and Visual Literacy and the New Zealand Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper will explore aspects of past practice and belief and how relevant these are to the future. New Zealand Curriculum guidelines will be examined in relation to best practice. Oral and visual texts will be discussed, as will the blurring of the boundaries between written and visual text with examples from picture books and graphic novels. Issues of cultural inclusion, authenticity, censorship and intertextuality will be related to selected texts and to popular culture.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

Theme: New Literacies The Verbal and the Visual

The curriculum for English in New Zealand is founded on three separate strands oral, written and visual language. The substrands are listening and speaking, reading and writing, and viewing and presenting. The strands are enacted through both their processes and their functions. The curriculum was developed from a functional grammar base with some acknowledgement of literary theory. Essentially it is a pragmatic document and a springboard for reasonably open-ended practice. It retains much of past best practice but leaves room for innovation and change. Although the strands of the curriculum have been separated, in practice they link and are interrelated. The motif for the curriculum is the plaited rope, a visual metaphor of the inseparability and interdependence of a whole model of language in action.

Another significant aspect of ENZC is its view of text. Texts are seen as oral, visual, written and read. The curriculum adopts this expanded view of text, a move from the past view of being that which is encoded in print. This allows for a rich range of discursive practice. "Traditionally modernist (systems) have been dominated by a hegemonic print discourse, in which the predominance of the printed word has been valorized at the expense of the digital," (Russell, 2000), despite the ubiquitous media environment of most homes.

The documents preceding ENZC were *English* (1961) and *Reading* (1961) and these were followed by *The Statement of Aims*.

The Statement of Aims sprang from a liberal humanist philosophy that relied on the professionalism of teachers and a paternalistic national bureaucracy. The emergence of the New Right in New Zealand in the 1980's led to notions of accountability and although there had been checks and balances in the past, education became viewed as a commodity rather than a public good. New educational influences and scholarship led to a perceived need for transparency over a self-regulating professionalism and a more rigorous document emerged, ENZC. Some traces of the visionary thinking of the past (*The Statement of Aims*) remained, as well as work in functional notions of literacy. It had long been held in New Zealand that language was a process and the idea of wholeness sat comfortably with most teachers.

Societal trends, particularly those moving away from the agrarian economic base for human capital in New Zealand, left a country seeking a new economy with workers skilled in knowledge – the much vaunted, but recently strangely silent, knowledge economy.

More pressing issues of public policy have recently captured the attention of political leaders and education is currently not a priority, although huge reforms are being developed in education assessment. The cyclical nature of societal needs, where the focus shifts to meet current urgencies, leads to some areas being marginalised to their detriment. In the longer view, like a merry-go-round, the wheel turns, sometimes with all of society functions in balance and at other times, skewed.

The development of curriculum over the past ten years in New Zealand has been extraordinary when contextualized over the longer period of settlement. National examinations at secondary level provided gate-keeping mechanisms to maintain the necessary economic, work force, balance. At primary (elementary) level, native intelligence could win out, in non-discriminatory ways, and tall poppies could emerge and did, from any level of the socio-economic stratification.

Today rigid barriers have been erected that work against the poor gaining access to society's largesse and opportunity. Schooling has been ghettoized and teaching as a profession undervalued. Strong oral language movements have flourished in New Zealand, from grass roots initiatives, to preserve indigenous language and culture and these have been replicated by other migrant groups. However, the aspirations of migrants burn brightly in the first and second generations but fade in a society, that seeks conformity and homogeneity, as has been the New Zealand tradition. Teachers remain optimistic and dedicated and in the main are not cynical, as this is not usually a characteristic of the lower middle class from which the teacher has traditionally emerged.

The visual media complements, rather than replaces, the traditional and creates a different literacy. "Texts produced for children in all stages of schooling include texts composed of visual and verbal materials …children…are quite simply immersed in texts constructed in the 'new literacy'…they are, after all, the most significant cultural influence on children and adults alike," (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1990). When my Scottish mother was a child in the rural north the students were placed in ranked order in the classroom. She was not a successful student. She demonstrated no brilliance whatsoever. In the drawing class she was unable to draw a recognisable shovel. This memory was vivid, as it was often repeated to us as children. The striking image of the shovel, as an iconic reference to rural poverty, remained with the learner, my mother, for life. Such a tool is virtually unknown today and its usage, doubtless exotic.

Paula Boock, a young New Zealand children's writer, often cites anecdotes from her childhood during public addresses. Whenever she asked her father a question, he would not give her a direct answer, he always told her a story. As a child this was a source of great mystification to Paula, some weird Dad-type aberration. As an adult she saw the point and stored the childhood stories into treasured memory.

ENZC validates the shovel and the storytelling father. It acknowledges that language manifests itself orally, visually and in the printed word. Rodney Wilson, the CEO of the Auckland Museum argues "that our identity is formed by our past; without an identity we are adrift, rudderless, directionless. Our identity defines our goals; our goals take us forward." The future takes with it, the past.

An example of the future taking the past with it, is Chris Slane and Robert Sullivan's graphic novel *Maui Legends of the Outcast*. Maui the Polynesian demi-god, alternately trickster and hero, is reconstructed in this text. Surprisingly though, despite the somewhat repellent nature of Chris Slane's graphics, the comic style text is authentic and can be traced to the Sir George Grey translations of 1855. "Grey's first book dealing with the myths and legends of the Maori was printed in England in 1854. It was written in Maori. In 1855 there appeared the first English translation." Reissued in 1956 as *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History of the Maori* as told by their Priests and Chiefs, it is illustrated by Russell Clarke in the Western art tradition, somewhat romanticised, with an aesthetically pleasing graphic distortion. Chris Slane's *Hine-nui-te-po* is a huge, menacing and formidable figure of mythic proportion. Roger Hart and A.W. Reed in *Maori Legends* first published in 1972, talk of the "persistent tradition, the only one that attempts to describe Maui's appearance…that one eye was like an eel, the other like a pounamu," an aspect that Chris Slane captures in the graphic novel version. Roger Hart's illustrations stay in the Western art tradition of realism with some reference to Maori iconography. Chris Slane breaks the rules and blurs the boundaries one might say, of taste. He uses the imagery of heroic comic form, a limited palette and no real tribute to realism – the subject matter does not warrant it. Speech bubbles and the conventions of comics, e.g. the KABOOM! effect, abound. Comics, Russell (2000) argues, provide a sophisticated, semiotic interaction of word and image. Comics can also contrast or contradict the verbal…text. One might ask is this a suitable text for classroom use? It probably depends on personal views of censorship. The text breaks many taboos in terms of taste. It explores infanticide, cannibalism, sibling rivalry, death and rebirthing. It resuscitates primary sources or as near as non-Maori speakers can get to them. The versions of Grey, A.W. Reed and Sullivan are authentic and uncontaminated by European appropriation. The Slane graphics are a powerful denial of romanticised colonial models and could only have been produced in the current socio-historic era (Myers, 1988). Slane uses the idiom of the comic and the fusion of myth and the mythic past, and modernism, the violent present. The conventions of the present, presage the future.

Picture books provide new visual challenges. Holt (2000) describes a strand of picture books which are visually layered and complex in a number of ways:

- they are political,
- they often investigate 'uncomfortable' subjects
- they take familiar texts and use them in entirely different ways
- they juxtapose images from the art and the entertainment worlds
- they are heavily reliant on symbolic understanding and interpretation
- the illustrations are of prime importance and are not simple.

Slane and Sullivan's book does all of these things.

What then is a 'graphic' novel? Some new genre or deviating offshoot? Perhaps its novel aspect is in its wholeness and complexity of subject. Its graphic character is intertwined with the text rather than separated as in a conventional picture book where, if necessary, one could stand without the other. Removing the illustrations from a graphic novel would destroy the whole. The multiplicity of competing voices is perhaps its defining character.

How does one, then 'read' such a book? It appears a demonic tale to an adult. Children's reactions may be very different indeed, immersed as they are in electronic texts and thus very skilled in the decoding of non-linear, global message making. Chris Slane and Robert Sullivan's graphic novel throws up many challenges. Do we examine its comic format? How do we read it? Do we look at its complex narrativity, its folkloric aspects? Is it a taonga, a sacred treasure? Does it break the rules and infringe cultural values? Do we read it 'straight' or with an ironic eye? ENZC gives us guidance in its focus on close reading and its acknowledgement of the construction of meaning through verbal and visual features of text.

Tagged by Gary Crew and Steven Woolman moves into the twentieth century and the Vietnam War. The anti- hero Vietnam veteran has been tagged as mad. He treasures his dead friend's military dogtags. A young boy finds him in a disused, ramshackle building at the docks. It is a story of identity, a young boy's fantasies of heroic exploits and an old man's, war-induced, madness. A tough book like *Maui* – is it suitable to use in a classroom? If one subscribes to the literacy concepts of the past, probably not. Literacy in its historical context, refers to the skills and abilities to interpret written text. Mason and Roder (2000) "state that 'literacy' has never been confined to a finite set of

skills, it continually changes in relation to historical, cultural and technological contexts. The world one lives in is the defining context for literacy."
One of the challenges for teachers is to be part of this world, this defining context for literacy. It is imperative that teachers have the expectation that students will develop the necessary and evolving literacy competencies of the future. "Important as (the) focus on the book has been, we must quickly expand this vision if we hope to prepare children for the futures they deserve. Today children need to be prepared for much more than book literacies" (Leu, 2000).
Leu (2000) also predicts that in the near future, if not already, "children's success…in reading will take place within networked ICT (rather) than within the pages of a book."

Author illustrators like Colin Thompson use their genius to blur the boundaries between written and visual text. One of Thompson's books, *Looking for Atlantis* has on the back cover, "reading together, 4 years and over, reading alone 6 years and over." Whoever wrote that had obviously never read *Looking for Atlantis* or *How to Live Forever (or Immortality for Beginners)*. Picture books yes, but like the graphic novels discussed, works of great complexity and sophistication. Thompson's texts involve visual and verbal symbolism, visual and verbal puns, alliterative gamesmanship, ironic jokes, social comment, the examination of knowledge and wisdom and the power of the book, and the even greater power of the imagination. New perceptions of literacy accommodate such texts because understandings of complexity have moved. Mason and Roder (2000) argue that "literacy refers not to an achieved state, but rather a life-long process of becoming 'literate.' In fact, what it means to be literate is a moving target, one we cannot define because it continues to evolve."

Societal change increasingly involves as Luke (1994) suggests a "multimediated literate culture" with many teachers still concentrating on a book culture. ENZC gives New Zealand teachers permission to enter the domain of the world the students live in and make it part of the discursive practice of the classroom. Russell (2000) contends that "one of the greatest changes that schools will ultimately find irresistible is the effects of media convergence in the context of contemporary culture."
An interesting example of the convergence of technologies is the Japanese NNT (Nippon Telephone and Telegraph) i-mode phone. You push a button on a cellphone and displayed are the five nearest restaurants, click the restaurant of choice and you get

a description of the food, a map and an immediate phone connection to book a table. Countless other services are available on the i-mode phone. Palm pilots or hand held computers are another example of media convergence. This explosion of creative divergence in the world of I.T. throws up huge challenges for the new pedagogy. Every weekend in Auckland, for example, children are able to select from a huge range of oral and visual texts, for their edification and perhaps for the annoyance of their elders. Television programmes, animated series, their own P.C.'s and laptops, interactive games, CD Roms and videos will be at many local children's disposal. The recent craze for text messaging friends or even people in the next room is part of the cool lifestyle of many teenagers. Many will log on to the Internet and jam the phone line for hours on end. The first interactive on-line movie was made recently in the United Kingdom, where the audience created the movie in a twenty four-hour chat room. This is what is happening now. The media convergence of which Russell (2000) writes 'melds communications and information technologies." This is not hypothetical. We all know this. Do we run in terror or do we embrace it? Morgan (1995) argues that "media are an important component of a post modern pedagogy." He says that there is no place to hide, " no place on earth is seen as a safe haven from modern media, an objective many schools still appear to aspire to." New Zealand teachers are embracing new concepts of literacy. We are all on a continuum in which the *Future of the Past* is a significant aspect. Russell (2000) argues that "the long accepted paradigm that assumes that schools are places where, more or less exclusively, print discourses take place" is being challenged by "students… parents and other members of the community who expect that schools should adequately reflect those discourses found in everyday life," and will give students access to the tools that will empower their future. Russell (2000) further states that "cultural change, convergence and reconceptualizations of literacies are likely to force a reappraisal of traditional literacy pedagogies.

Mason and Roder (2000), New Zealand researchers state "We certainly don't advocate the subordination of traditional text in literacy programmes, or less focus on the basic process of oral, visual and written language – but we do advocate a shift in focus to accommodate the reality of the fast growing importance of non-linear text, especially the Internet, as contexts for literacy, and the need for teachers to confidently support students in their interactions with these texts."

What then is the *Future of the Past?* The literacy tradition in New Zealand is strong. As a small country with a national education system a strong philosophy has evolved. It is constantly under media scrutiny. As early as 1928 best practice was seen as delivering programmes that recognised the interrelatedness of reading and writing, and the same dichotomy of listening and speaking. Recognition of visual literacy is far more recent and its disarming impetus completes the model which ENZC embraces. The integration of oral, written and visual literacy is more or less inseparable in the construction and representation of ideas. Is this enough to guide the future? Perhaps a Maori proverb is useful as the Maori tradition is firmly anchored in the past as the teacher for the future.

Ma to rourou
Ma paku rourou
Ka ora ai te iwi
With your food basket and my
food basket we will all be sustained.

NOTE: The title of this paper, *The Future of the Past* is taken from a *Conversazione on Culture and Society* held at Lincoln College, Oxford, England on 27th and 28th September, 1997 and cited in P. D. James' autobiography *Time To Be In Earnest* (1999).

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